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ABSTRACT

Supported by funds from the Federal Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, staff members of West Virginia University's Appalachian Center designed and implemented a 5-year experimental program designed to improve the economic conditions and the quality of living in 2 Appalachian communities. The approach was that of community and public-agency involvement. Success of the project was attributed to (1) modification of the rigid, structural requirements usually imposed by public agencies and (2) improving communications between the communities and the agencies. In this preliminary report on the project's impact on the 2 communities involved, descriptions of the model--including problems encountered--are offered. (JB)

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design for action

Community Problem Solving In Disadvantaged Communities

RC005423

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
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PREFACE

About four years ago several members of the Appalachian Center's staff in the Charleston area began an experimental project designed to facilitate the solution of problems in several "hollow" communities in that area. This project was supported by a grant of funds awarded by the Federal Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture. The project is now in its fifth and final year. Plans are being completed at present by the Office of Research and Development to conduct a thorough in-depth evaluation of the project and the results will be published in the Office's *Research Series* some time during 1969. The evaluation is being directed by Wil J. Smith and Beryl Johnson.

This paper, "Design for Action", is a preliminary report on the project's impact on two of the communities involved in it. The author, Thomas E. Woodall, was deeply involved in the leadership and execution of the project. Those of the Appalachian Center staff who have visited the communities which are described and discussed believe that the efforts made in them both by extension staff and residents of the communities themselves were highly effective and productive of desirable long-range changes.

The project described in this paper is illustrative of the variety of programs fielded by West Virginia University's Appalachian Center in its efforts to contribute to the development of West Virginia and its people. Other programs will be discussed in future numbers of this Office's Information Series in the months and years to come. However, the Appalachian Center is not willing to engage in programs for the sake of programs. Whenever possible, evaluations of programs are conducted. A number of reports of such evaluations will be published in the Office of Research and Development's *Research Series* in the future.

This paper was under the editorial supervision of Beryl Johnson.

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DESIGN FOR ACTION

Community Problem Solving In Disadvantaged Communities

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Information Series 4

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DESIGN FOR ACTION

A major step in expanding programs aimed at improving economic conditions and the quality of living in disadvantaged areas is to move beyond the individual and the home into a confrontation of common problems through some form of community-wide action. One of the most serious obstacles to realizing this objective is the gap in communications between the people in such areas and the agencies, organizations, and programs established by society for dealing with such problems. Indeed, the complex, rapidly changing, technology-oriented culture of our time has bypassed many thousands of our nation's citizens, leaving them out of any effective participation in the decisions that determine their destinies.

Unlike those in the higher economic and social strata, the disadvantaged experience relatively little of the psychological and emotional sense of interdependence that characterizes those more affluent members of our society who, by virtue of their status and background, participate widely in many significant areas of our culture. "Indeed our vocabulary includes such terms as apathy,[1] alienation,[2] isolation[3], and anomie[4] to describe the nonrelationship between large numbers of people and the mainstream of society."[5]

This communications gap, this "lack of communication and interaction with the outside"[6] that is so characteristic of the disadvantaged, is particularly true of the Appalachian rural community dweller, it is exemplified in his regard of his government and his society, not as "a we, a cooperative extension of himself, but as a they",[7] apart from and aloof from him and his own relevant concerns. The phenomonen is vividly sketched by Harry Caudill in a description of one Appalachian community:

[1]Barber, Bernard, "Participation and Mass Apathy in Associations," *Studies in Leadership,* Alvin W. Gouldner, ed. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950), pp. 330-41.

[2]Fromm, Erich. *The Sane Society,* (New York: Rinehart, 1955.) pp. 120-52. 191-208.

[3]Ford, Thomas R., "The Passing of Provincialism," *The Southern Appalachian Region,* Ford, ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), pp. 9-34.

[4]Simpson, George, editor, *Emile Durkheim,* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1963), pp. 69-84.

[5]Miller, Robert W. and Zeller, Frederick A., *An Analysis of Participation in Contemporary Society,* (Morgantown: Institute for Labor Studies, West Virginia University, 1967), pp. 4-5.

[6]Photiadis, John D., *Rural Southern Appalachia and Mass Society, an Overview,* (Morgantown: West Virginia University, 1966), p. 6.

[7]Weller, Jack, *Yesterday's People,* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 33.

> Most saddening of all are the myriads of men, women and children who sit on the front porches of shacks and houses gazing with listless unconcern at the world. The creeks and yards are littered with tin cans, paper bags, cartons. . . . The cloak of idleness, defeat, dejection and surrender has fallen so heavily as to leave them scarcely more than alive. Their communities are turned into graveyards peopled with the living dead and strewn with the impediments of a civilization which once needed them but does so no longer.[8]

The members of West Virginia University's Appalachian Center staff in the Charleston area had the opportunity to encounter, through direct experience, situations such as those described by Weller, Caudill, Ford, and others who have written in recent years about the problems of Appalachia. The staff participated in a unique community program employing an approach that attacks the demoralzing effects of alienation and apathy by involving the individual directly in communal efforts designed to accomplish cooperatively defined objectives. The aim of the project, a special five-year experimental program cooperatively administered by the Federal Extension Service and the West Virginia University Extension Service, was to focus on ways of working effectively with individuals, families, and groups that have been bypassed and left out by society.

Communities A and B,* selected for participation in the program, are both rural non-farm communities located in two counties adjacent to Kanawha County in Central West Virginia. Each community is considerably below the U.S. average for family income and individual educational attainment: from 50 to 70 per cent of the households have incomes of less than $3,000; and over 60 per cent of the residents 19 years old and over have less than an eighth grade education. Four persons have education beyond high school.[9]

The communities have a high percentage of young people. Incidence of home ownership is high, and rental fees are low, but housing quality is also low. Wood and coal are common fuels for cooking and heating. Less than 25 per cent of the homes have central heating and less than 40 per cent have running water. Most of the drinking water is obtained from drilled or dug wells with some coming from cisterns

*The communities are identified in this way to protect their identity.

[8]Caudill, Harry M., *Night Comes to the Cumberlands,* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, & Co., 1962), p. 346.

[9]Fasching, Joseph L., "New Design for Appalachia," *Extension Service Review,* Vol. 37 No. 3. (March, 1966), pp. 7-10.

or springs. Water is often carried from neighbor's wells. About 25 per cent of the homes have inside bathrooms.[10]

Community A was once a large coal mining camp. It has two churches and a school building. Many houses, built during the busier days of the coal boom, are run down. Some have running water. The project area includes 71 families, totaling 261 persons.[11]

Community B, a dead-end hollow, has no school, church, or other public buildings. A few homes are neat and well cared for. Others are weather beaten and deteriorating. Still others are tar paper covered shacks. As the project began, junk cars, discarded refrigerators, washing machines, tin cans and out houses crowded unkempt yards. A creek runs through the hollow, following the course of the rutted dirt road.[12] Community B has a population of 39 families with a total of 153 persons.

The staff discovered that the effects of alienation, apathy and isolation in communities A and B blocked efforts to marshal community and agency resources in two characteristic ways. One was that generally people are not aware of services and programs available or are reluctant to make the necessary contacts because of the increasingly bureaucratic and formalistic nature of our public and private agencies. The other obstacle to action is that agencies, operating from a centralized location and dispensing services on an agency-centered basis, do not really know the problems, needs, and feelings of the people.

The first need seemed to be the development of some sense of community spirit, organization, and unified effort as a basis for improving and increasing communication on two levels: (1) between people in the communities, and (2) between agencies and people. This could come about only after intensive work with individuals, families and special groups on personal, family and home problems, which had been largely accomplished during the first three years of the program in the two communities selected for the project.

Contact by extension agents with individual families resulted in preschool programs for the young children, homemaking and family living classes for mothers, workshops for the fathers in making play equipment for the preschool program, youth programs such as 4-H for the older children, health and safety classes for adults, and summer recreation programs for children of all ages. The effect of these activities, over the three-year period, was considerable success in devel-

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

oping rapport, awareness, changed practices, and new attitudes on the part of the residents of both communities. The next appropriate step seemed to be community effort.

The staff's experience indicated that only sporadic, individual efforts were normally made in attempting to deal with common problems on the part of residents of the two communities. Problem situations were generally approached on an isolated basis. If they occasionally involved a number of individuals, the efforts were poorly planned, inefficiently executed, and were without the persistent character demanded for any real impact on the problem at hand to be expected. Also, little help with relevant concerns had been offered by professionals, who often were intent upon "selling" a particular program or solution. The inherent needs, opinions, and attitudes of the communities had been largely ignored by the many agencies and organizations offering a multiplicity of services that were too often either irrelevant to the rural community resident or so involved in the "red tape" of agency policies and regulations as to be nonexistent for all practical purposes.

The initial phase of the community-wide action efforts involved home visits with each family in the two communities. Residents had little experience with formal gatherings oriented toward consideration of common concerns, and the idea of cooperative problem solving efforts first had to be discussed with individual families on a personal basis. During these home visits, the idea of acting together and in unison on relevant problem situations was presented to the people. Discussions also centered around community conditions and problems which many of the families seemed to have in common. Among the most frequently encountered items seemed to be the need for action to stimulate improvement in such areas as roads, utility service, education, health, recreation and youth activities.

Following the home visits, community meetings were scheduled for each of the two communities. The purpose of these meetings was to bring community people together for a discussion of the problem identification-solution process in such a way as to stimulate an exchange of ideas, viewpoints and attitudes concerning the method by which this process could best be carried out. The aim was to achieve maximum participation of community people in the design and implementation of the entire effort from the beginning. Only in this way could it be considered a true community effort, and not just another "project" or "program" superimposed upon the people by professionals and experts. Perhaps more significant than the implementation

of any specific improvement of a physical nature was the effort made by the staff to elicit the processes of self-discovery, growing insight, and increased self-awareness on the part of the local citizens. As ideas were discussed in the give and take of the community meetings, it was possible to detect an emergence of leadership, a greater sense of community responsibility, an increased awareness of the importance of rationally defined goals, a clearly discernible improvement in motivation, and the desire to move forward with determination and purpose.

One of the most important insights gained by citizens in the early stages of the program was the need for leadership on an organized, officially sanctioned basis. The result was the formation of community improvement associations in both communities. Officers were elected, and various problem areas were defined as most immediate and requiring direct and forceful action.

Following these formative steps, an extension agent who was providing leadership for the conduct of the project suggested the idea of studies by community improvement committees, composed of volunteers from the communities. The committee members would delineate the nature of existing problems, basing their studies upon their own observations and insights and those of other community residents, as well as the advice and assistance of the extension staff. After thorough consideration, the idea was adopted and the committees were formed. They consisted of four men in community B and six men and eleven women in community A, a larger community with a greater population from which to draw volunteers.

Community people began to develop a broader conception of the extension agent and the extension service as the meetings continued. Prior to initiation of the community problem solving effort, extension personnel had been seen as working almost exclusively with problems of an individual or family nature. The extension staff also became aware of its own relevance in relation to a practical and realistic confrontation with both the specific problem situations of the people and with the process orientation of human beings. Also, they became intimately involved in a dynamic effort to meet common concerns with a cooperative, unified, and systematic attack.

Committee members chose specific problem areas on which to work in such areas as roads, utilities, health, education, welfare, and recreation. Committee members then contacted other local residents in order to base their studies upon a maximum involvement of all segments of the community's population. The extension agent met

with committee members on a weekly basis to provide guidance, consultation, and assistance in answering questions, clarifying possibilities, suggesting alternatives, and assessing the progress of problem identification efforts. At first, the committee members and other community residents who attended the weekly meetings expected the extension agent to dominate the sessions, to describe their problems and solutions, and to explain exactly how they should proceed. The agent felt that his efforts would be useless if he played such a role. He concluded that his function was to help the citizens to better understand what they wanted to do and to arrive at their own conceptions of what they felt, thought, and needed.

The methods utilized by the committees varied in accordance with the skills and abilities of each individual member as the problem reports were prepared. The clarity and effectiveness of the work of some of the members demonstrated their ability in analyzing the problems. In community B, one committee member, a laborer for a railroad company, analyzed road problems in a handwritten report of about 5 pages, complete with diagrams illustrating the nature of existing road situations that needed correction accompanied by drawings of his own recommended solutions. In community A, two women typed their reports in a remarkably lucid, vital way, even going as far as to criticize the State Road Commission's method of establishing priorities in determining work to be done on secondary roads and the tax structure of the state.

However, many of the committee members lacked this ability. As had been expected, they experienced difficulty in forming their observations and those of the other community people into a comprehensive, systematic report. Consequently, a tape recorder was brought to committee meetings, and the observations and insights of committee members were recorded as they spoke at the weekly sessions. At the end of six weeks of the problem study process, Community Problems Reports were developed from the written and tape recorded findings of the committees.

The role of the extension agent during the period of the studies had been that of friend, counselor and guide, not that of the "expert" with all the answers or the "professional" with a program to sell. Throughout the process all people present at meetings were encouraged to engage in discussion to induce the widest possible participation and to insure that action taken and decisions made were based upon a democratic process of group interaction involving all members in a constructive and meaningful way. The principle of community self-

determination became foremost in staff thinking as staff members became increasingly involved in the communities' efforts to define priorities. "Communities, like individuals, have a right to self determination. In community organization, the worker enables the community to develop its own policies, plans and programs. They are not superimposed."[12]

Working jointly on determining which agencies offered services and programs most relevant to the needs and problems identified, the committee members and the extension staff invited representatives of ten agencies to meet with them for problem solving workshops in each community. Included among the agencies were the Office of Economic Opportunity, the State Road Commission, the Public Service Commission, the Health and Welfare Departments, and County Boards of Education, Farmers Home Administration, Employment Security and Vocational Rehabilitation. Once agencies were adequately informed about the purposes of the meetings, they were willing to participate. In fact, it was felt that the work of the citizens committees in collecting information on problems with which the agencies would eventually deal would save them a great deal of preliminary work when they were ultimately confronted with the problem. The extension agent, while recognizing this view, felt that more importantly the needs and problems of people in communities like these never come to the attention of the appropriate agencies. As was discussed earlier, citizens and agencies are often separated by a wide gulf of misunderstanding, bureaucratic procedures, apathy and alienation.

It was determined that the workshop sessions should be conducted in as informal a manner as possible to encourage maximum participation. An agenda of five steps had been developed by the staff and Community Improvement Committee members. (1) Community leaders opened the sessions, and the extension agent made brief introductory remarks. (2) Each agency representative then made short statements concerning his agency and its relevance to the problems of people as communities. (3) The Community Improvement Committee members then discussed their findings in the form of a report to the agencies and local citizens who were present. Next (4) a planning session was held which most participants considered the most important part of the entire workshop. In these sessions, committee members, seated at conference tables, discussed the problems that they had

[12]Johns, Ray and DeMarche, David F., *Community Organization and Agency Responsibility*. (New York: Association Press, 1951), p. 235.

identified with the appropriate agency. Then, working together, they focused upon the development of plans and programs designed to solve the problems and to meet the needs of the community. Following the planning period, (5) another general session was held in which the Community Improvement Committee members and agency people summarized the problems discussed, the solutions arrived at, and plans developed for maximum follow-up action. These follow-up plans called for continued close contact between citizens and agencies through further meetings in the communities as planned programs are carried out.

In community B, 15 people from the community attended the workshop, while the community A workshop attracted 100. The much larger attendance in community A can be explained primarily by the difference in population of the two communities.

The efforts in cooperative community problem solving were embarked upon with no preconceived notions about the direction in which initiative should be channeled. At first people were hesitant about coming together, skeptical of the efficacy of the extension staff's attempts to do something constructive for their communities. But as the staff continued to meet with them in their homes and in the weekly meetings, the residents saw that the staff meant what it said. The staff was really there to help the people do what they wanted, not what the staff, or other professionals, saw as most important.

By the time the workshop sessions were held, community residents seemed to have developed a stronger sense of responsibility for their common problems and a greatly increased optimism and enthusiasm toward the possible outcome of the meetings. When the staff had begun to work with them, the citizens expressed some feelings of apathy and hopelessness toward the idea of really having any significant impact on the destiny of their communities. As time passed following the workshops, and contacts with agency respresentatives continued periodically, citizens began to see tangible evidence of the accomplishments of their cooperative problem solving endeavors. In community B plans were initiated to develop a community water system through the cooperation of the Farmers Home Administration. Work on the community natural gas system, already under way prior to the workshop, was intensified, and now is completed. Road Committee recommendations were surveyed by SRC officials, and work has now begun on them. Health Department officials agreed to obtain a permit for the community to dump garbage and trash at officially designated locations within the county. They also advised residents on

how to deal with a large body of stagnant backwater in the community which serves as a breeding ground for mosquitoes. The problem of the dangerous community railroad crossing is now being studied by railroad and road commission officials. Possible solutions include the erection of a traffic signal and improvement of the approach to the crossing.

In community A natural gas service has been extended to 108 families because of joint plans developed by the Public Service Commission, gas company officials and citizens. Plans have also been developed for a water system through cooperation with FHA. Road Commission crews are busy carrying out committee recommendations. This already has resulted in improved garbage collection and school bus service to the community. Adult Basic Education classes have been established in cooperation between the community's education committee and the local Board of Education after 27 local adults indicated their desire for further education.

Inadequate recreational programs have been a problem in community A for years. However, Recreation Committee members were able to develop plans in cooperation with the Board of Education's Recreation Supervisor for both day and evening recreation for children and adults. This included transportation of children to a swimming pool for weekly swimming lessons under the supervision of competent, experienced instructors. A Boy Scout Troop was formed on the initiative of a community welfare recipient who volunteered to act as Scoutmaster. The Health Committee, in cooperation with extension personnel, health and welfare officials, and the cancer control unit of a Charleston Hospital, set up a one-day cancer clinic, attended by 67 women of the community.

The implications of this effort go far beyond the tangible, material projects that have or will result from the problem identification process and the workshop sessions. The problems and plans discussed in the workshops were developed entirely from the perspective of the community citizens. Agency representives were faced with the actual, vital situations of people in the communities, where these problems are lived with day after day. Thus, the agencies were able to focus their resources on the problems and develop feasible solutions on a more valid and realistic basis. The presence of several agencies in the community at the same time also permitted more comprehensive and unified approaches to problem situations than are possible when agencies are involved independently.

The fact that the group processes that went into the organizational efforts in these two communities were eventually oriented in the direction of attaining some concrete, practical objectives greatly encouraged participants to continue and to form even more cohesive units. Since so many of those involved come from what has been designated as the disadvantaged strata of society, this is of particular significance. As S. M. Miller has pointed out:

> The poor can't be organized in abstract ways. They must be organized around programs which show promise of yielding benefits. Indeed, all the current talk about 'participation' is meaningless unless it is understood and accepted that participation must have an immediate impact upon the poor people and their problems.[14]

The early realization of certain relevant goals can cement the gains in interdependence and cohesive mutually supportive group interaction that have developed during the cooperative efforts leading to implementation of these goals.

Much has been written concerning the nonparticipation and lack of skills in social and group interaction on the part of the disadvantaged, and particularly the Appalachian hollow resident. It has often been viewed as a failure on his part to adjust to the conditions established by society as being necessary for participation in the main-stream of our culture. However, it can be viewed with just as much validity as a failure on the part of society to provide adequate alternatives for such participation, resulting in the exclusion of such people from any effective voice in helping to shape the decisions that determine their destinies. Since they have existed for so long under such conditions, they have come to believe that this is the way the system has to operate, and that they can have no appreciable impact upon inducing it to become concerned with them and their problems. Society thus finds itself faced with the alienation and isolation that characterizes the disadvantaged in our culture.

The success of the community improvement efforts in the two communities involved in the project reflects a modification of the rigid, structural requirements usually imposed by agencies and organizations seeking to work with the disadvantaged. The result is the replacement of these requirements by goals designed by the people themselves and oriented toward accomplishment of objectives relevant

[14]Miller, S. M., *Poverty in America: The Problem, Anti-Poverty Programs, and a Role for Organized Labor,* (Morgantown: Institute for Labor Studies, West Virginia University, 1967), p. 12.

to them. Those who have been involved in the project see this approach as a solution to the alienation and apathy that has gripped the people of Appalachia's rural communities far too long. It is also believed that the project demonstrates that people in such communities can and will become interested in doing something about their problems. These people need help in organizing, in learning to function as acting members of a group endeavor, and in realizing that professionals do care about the resident's vital and immediate needs rather than the middle class oriented values and objectives that are sometimes advocated for the disadvantaged.

The professionals need to prove that they are willing to move away from the outmoded concepts of dispensing services and concentrating upon agency centered problems. Instead, agencies, and citizens become partners in the common task of building better communities. As partners, they affirm their essential unity in seeking to:

> . . . learn how to work out a joint destiny over which they can maintain control. Inherent here is the conviction that human beings have boundless potential for development, for ascribing to noble ends, for warmth in day-to-day relationships, for electric excitement - intellectually and affectively - in their lives. And their living together is to a marked extent within their communities, the phychological geographic germinus of the web of birth, life and death.[15]

Extension workers and other agency people see the community problem solving model developed in these two communities as valid for use in marshalling the resources of citizens of other communities. Similar work has already been initiated in a number of other communities beyond the pilot areas. Further spread of the technique can be aided and encouraged as earlier communities become more self dependent.

As citizens in these communities continue to grow and develop in their organizational and problem solving skills, new techniques can be developed for working on increasingly important and significant projects, and the concept expanded to more and more communities. It is important that no community be deserted by those aiding in the problem solving efforts. Rather, each community should be encouraged to eventually become part of larger county and area programs with goals and objectives transcending those of any specific community but still dealing with questions of immediate and vital interest to the people of all communities. Thus, the welfare of the entire county or

[15]Franklin, Richard, "Editor's Preface," *Pattern of Community Development*, Richard Franklin, ed., (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1966) p. 2.

area, or perhaps the state, can be immensely improved by an informed and concerned citizenry working on a mutually responsible basis with their agencies and their government, moving toward the goal of achieving " 'whole communities' built by mature individuals acting together."[16]

[16]Mial, Dorothy and Mial, Curtis. "Introduction," *Patterns of Community Development,* Richard Franklin, ed. (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1966), p. 16.

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